Libraries and the Climate of Opinion

ERVIN J. GAINES

IN ANY SOCIAL SETTING, censorship is a weapon of the dominant group. It is the means of exercising social control in favor of prevailing doctrines, whether political, economic, theological, moral—or any combination of them. Censorship is effectively exercised only with the participation of the executive, legislative and judicial processes of government, for through enforcement of laws and the punishment of those who offend those laws the purpose of censorship is achieved. In the absence of repressive measures by the constituted authorities, censorship is rendered ineffectual and freedom is maintained for society. Voluntary censorship within, for example, a religious sect or any other tightly knit subcultural group whose members have by common consent decreed a set of exclusionary doctrines, is an entirely private matter and need not concern us, because it is a legitimate exercise of free choice, which is the essential ingredient of liberty. The right *not* to read is the obverse of the right to read, and both are defensible.

Conflict within democracy arises when any group attempts to impose its definition of acceptable communication upon the entire society by enacting laws which the enforcing arms of government—police and the courts—are obliged to inflict on those who do not conform. It is important to focus on the distinction between the proselytizing by individuals or organizations who are committed to limited expression on the one hand, and officially condoned censorship imposed by the state on the other. The first is acceptable, the second is not.

Some perspective on the history of censorship is helpful in understanding our present circumstances. Ralph E. McCoy's splendid bibliography[1] is the most nearly complete guide to writings about censorship ever assembled in the English-speaking world. Containing about 8,000 entries, it spans several hundred years, and it enables us

Ervin J. Gaines is Director, Minneapolis Public Library.

to detect the rhythms of censorship in modern times. What anyone could have inferred is clearly demonstrable in McCoy: official censorship fluctuates with social tensions. As fears of social danger rise, censorship activity rises with it; when the one subsides, so does the other.

The first great wave of censorship swept the Western world in the sixteenth century after the printed book helped to precipitate the Reformation and Counter-Reformation movements within the Christian Church. The Catholic *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* was an invention to blunt the thrust of the Protestant revolt. It remained a viable instrument as long as the internecine struggle continued and it faded only when the institutionalized forces of Christianity decided to terminate their 500-year contest for domination.

In England, after the Reformation, three distinct epidemics of censorship controversy raged. The first, during the seventeenth century Puritan attempt to consolidate control of the government, inspired the most eloquent of all works on the subject, Milton's *Areopagitica.* Although the debate over the right of the state to impose its will on free expression did not by any means disappear during the eighteenth century, it was conducted at a much lower pitch until it intensified again during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic period. So passionate was the struggle from 1790 to 1820 that notable authors like Byron and Shelley exiled themselves rather than endure what they regarded as the harsh and repressive climate of English society, while many lesser authors who remained behind suffered imprisonment and other forms of harassment for refusing to conform to the prevailing wisdom. The hundred years between Waterloo and the outbreak of World War I were relatively calm, and even though from today's vantage point Victorianism is regarded as especially repressive in sexual matters, there was a widespread social acceptance of the prevailing sexual mores, and authors displayed almost no rebelliousness at the constraints precisely because they felt none. Hence, Englishmen showed small disposition to joust with the authorities. Flurries of discontent, especially during the last decade of the nineteenth century, were quickly snuffed out. But after World War I, when literary giants like D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce (both of whom had exiled themselves for reasons that recalled those of Byron and Shelley) clashed with officially acceptable literary conventions, the censorship battles took on a renewed seriousness that has continued until today. Upon reflection, one is moved to suggest that we are at

the tag-end of the sexual revolution, and that what Joyce and Lawrence stood for has been established, if not yet completely accepted.

The American experience parallels the British. The most eloquent statements about freedom of the press tended to occur immediately following the onset of the American Revolution and, in some ways, were probably a reflection of the European ferment; the issue of a free press in the United States was most fiercely contested around 1800, focusing especially on the Alien and Sedition Acts. Generally, the nineteenth century was so calm on the pivotal question of censorship, that the quixotic Anthony Comstock operated virtually without demur from the authors who towered over the literary scene in the years after the Civil War. As in Great Britain, World War I was the watershed experience that precipitated new attitudes and a renewed dedication to the principle that authors must be free of governmental intervention. The 1920's proved a lively time, leading inexorably to the importation of Joyce's *Ulysses* followed by the censorship battles that have embroiled the Supreme Court over the last fifteen years. Now the United States seems almost ready to yield the point that sexual writings cannot be interdicted by the state. We know that Denmark has already crossed the last barrier, and it is likely that the United States will soon follow.

It may be useful to ponder for a moment the meaning of Anthony Comstock in the long warfare over intellectual freedom. After the distractions of the Civil War, the United States became intensely preoccupied with industrial and territorial expansion, possibly as a reaction to the emotional excesses that had accompanied the great struggle to end slavery and to save the Union. The finer points about human rights were dulled in the coarser dialog of the market place. A zealot like Comstock could move freely in such an environment, both because few thoughtful men particularly cared and because they construed his efforts as harmonious with the interests of those who labored in the industrial and business communities. Questions of civil rights, in all their prickly ramifications, had their renaissance after the sour and disillusioning experience of the First World War, and the special issues arising from censorship were deeply interwoven with them. The collapse of Comstockery coincides exactly with the fierce struggles that occurred over the infamous Palmer raids, the Sacco-Vanzetti trial and other manifestations of American dissatisfaction with the *status quo*. The arguments about censorship are perennial, and the current issues are not critically different from those

which arose during the early days of the republic. The safety of the state as achieved through "right thinking" is the rationale for censorship, and the freedom of the individual to dissent is the rationale for a free press. While it is hard to imagine Thomas Jefferson in the same milieu as Philip Roth or Eldridge Cleaver, the axial concept on which those minds turn is identical.

American thinking just now is modified by special circumstances—some of which are probably temporary and will have no lasting influence; others permanent and of increasingly cumulative force. These circumstances might be sorted out and the ephemeral ones disposed of first, both because they are superficial and because they are more prominent in the popular eye. Since the advent of the Soviet Revolution, which coincided with World War I, the United States has been under powerful psychological pressure to compete with another system. America's manifest destiny to bring light to the world has never been quite the same since the Russian Bear got on to the highway in front of us, which has caused us to push to "prove" our superiority. Although historical analogy suggests that this combative competition between Communism and democracy will eventually subside, its existence here and now heightens tensions and leads to some extraordinary inner conflicts in American society. Because a great deal of the censorship debate in recent decades has related to the international conflict, authors and institutions have suffered popular and even official opprobrium for allying themselves with causes that apparently or actually support the "enemy." The combined stimuli of fear and patriotism have prompted attacks on internal traitors or deceived innocents, and the United States has developed a rather extensive rhetoric of vilification to hold dissenters in line. The peak time for this censorship activity was about 1950, when Senator Joseph McCarthy led the American purge campaign. Although this effort is not as intense as it was, it has never been wholly absent from our society in the last half century, nor is it likely to disappear until some permanent accommodation is made with the Soviet Union.

The ideological campaign against Communism in many ways resembles the earlier conflict within the Christian Church, and it often results in strange paradoxes. Political conservatism allied to anti-Communism seems to inspire a rather intense puritanism against sexual writings, as though there were some moral imperative to relate personal behavior to political beliefs. The tortuous thinking that causes John Birch Society adherents to equate juvenile sex education pro-

grams with Communist plots has a kind of mad logic to it that is difficult to deal with on a rational basis. Were it not so painful in its consequences, let us say, to teachers who would like their students to read *Catcher in the Rye,* it would be comic, for the rabid conservative neglects to observe that the Communist ideology is equally concerned with purity in personal behavior. Sexual puritanism is not a monopoly of Western democracy, and we may recall that many a Soviet writer has felt the iron hand of official disapproval for daring to contravene the older sexual codes. Hence, American conservative disapproval on political grounds of free sexual expression in literature is not valid, although we may expect it to continue simply because patriotic appeal is often the readiest way to quell dissent.

This anomaly in the American censorship movement may be illogical, but it is prevalent and troublesome because it aligns powerful social forces against the individual's assertion of his own dignity. Similarly, the revolt of the Blacks and the young evoke excited responses pointing to repression of their means of communication—the *Berkeley Barb* for example. America is particularly troubled at this moment by student restlessness and rebelliousness. As the nation goes through a transition from older conventions and relationships among the various races and between adults and the juveniles, literature not unexpectedly is often cited as the culprit. Concerns and anxieties that have been aroused while the social foundations move and shake have provoked extravagant claims about the evil effects of license in literature. If pornography is not at the root of our troubles, the argument runs, it must be at least a causative factor, and if the older literary conventions can be restored, then the revolutionary upheavals may cease. A boy who has ready access to dirty pictures is more likely to be corrupted than one who does not; ergo, forbid them.

But, if my premise that the Communist threat and the Black and youthful revolts will in time subside is correct, we may expect that the pressures for censorship will subside with them. Past experience and a reading of the history of censorship lends confidence to this prediction. Aside from such speculation, however, there remain other and more difficult accommodations to be made, and these seem to relate to technology. Again, taking our point of departure from World War I, we observe that what has happened since then to cause turmoil and conflict over the permissive limits of expression may have less to do with politics and sex and much more to do with the invasion of our thought processes by newer means of communication. The strategy

for dealing with communications in our legal codes is based on the printed word. The advent of the motion picture may have posed the first problem to us. It is instructive, for example, that earlier in the century the motion picture was regarded as lying beyond the protection of the First Amendment to the Constitution. In 1915, the Supreme Court held that films were "entertainment," and not until the *Jacobellis* case of 1964 did the Court accept fully the analogy between print and film by providing the legal basis upon which film-makers could assert their claims for protection at least equal to those of publishers and authors. The time lag between the popularization of the motion picture and the acceptance of it on the same legal footing as the printed word was not very great in historical terms, but when the forty-nine years are considered against the rate of change in our technology, the lag is quite serious. The motion picture was not accepted until after television had already made its first smashing impact upon our world. What we now face is a further struggle to assimilate this newer means of communication into our social institutions even though television's effect upon us is barely understood. Technology has created a communications revolution with which we do not know how to cope. It is evident from the tenor of popular discussion that awareness of the deep significance of the change is lacking in our manner of communicating.

In a recent symposium of historians, as reported in *Daedalus*,[2] discussion was given to the perplexity of historians in securing the documentation which traditionally has provided the basis for understanding historical developments. The use of the telephone and the increasing tendency to destroy records created during the formulation of important policy decisions are making problems for scholars. For librarians, the implications of verbal and visual displacement of the printed word are enormous. Not only are we faced with the diminution of certain kinds of documents, but we are increasingly baffled by our inability to identify the sources of the messages. One does not have to accept or reject the histrionics of Marshall McLuhan; it is enough to acknowledge that he has invited attention to a phenomenon of incalculable dimensions. We no longer have time to deliberate on our circumstances and to forge the instruments for dealing with the perplexities that beset us. Events outrun our institutional constructs for dealing with them. It is no wonder that rumblings of a social earthquake can be heard. Technology is ahead of us and is likely to remain there. By the time we have learned to live with television, personally,

legally, politically and socially, we will find ourselves beset by still newer means of communicating across the barriers of political boundaries and social taboos.

Against this quickly sketched background, where is the place of the library and the librarian? It has occurred to me, as I am sure it has to others, that the pressures upon libraries are greatest at those points where public tax money is involved. Private libraries are virtually unassailed. Even in the heyday of the Watch and Ward Society in Boston, when the Boston Public Library was most circumspect in its dealings with the community, Harvard University remained apart from conflict because it lay outside the sphere of public control. State-supported institutions have not always been so fortunate.

Public and school libraries are in the most exposed position of all because they are most accessible to democratic control and because they are closely involved with children. Accountability and social responsibility weigh most heavily upon these libraries. Vulnerability to criticism is also one of their outstanding characteristics. One noisy citizen has the power to upset the functioning of a school or public library in a way not accessible to him if he reaches toward the better-protected university which is surrounded by moats of tradition and respectability that the newer libraries do not have available for their defense.

In saying this I do not mean to express regret for the absence of more effective shields. In a democratic society, the very openness of the institutions is of high value in promoting egalitarian aspirations. The public and school libraries are sensitized to the dangers and the opportunities presented by democratic control and are less likely to fall into somnolent disregard of human need. If all the casualties in the fight for intellectual freedom are in the public libraries, they only tell us where the fight is. The sense of danger adds excitement to the enterprise, and we might suggest what Henry V said before the battle of Agincourt:

> Gentlemen in England now abed
> Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
> And hold their manhoods cheap while any speaks
> That fought with us upon St. Crispin's day.

It is certainly in the interest of intellectual freedom to go through the daily grinding battles, to knock the shackles off men's minds and help the individual citizen through the miasma of his fears and anxie-

ties to the higher ground of reconciliation and acceptance. The library that has not experienced a battle is quite likely a library that has not attempted to challenge the conservative mores of a community by making available new and daring material.

The climate of librarianship is probably better than it was even as recently as the late 1950s when Marjorie Fiske's *Book Selection and Censorship*[3] revealed the timidity of librarians. There seem to be more librarians ready to risk their jobs in behalf of a more viable intellectual atmosphere within their institutions, and they are having more success. The American Library Association is bolder than it was and it seems now to be taking more seriously than ever before its responsibility not only to advocate but also to fight. These are good signs, and they should not be overlooked.

The most conservative area of librarianship now seems to be in children's work, both in public and in school libraries. The older traditions are still dominant, and the reluctance of school librarians to adopt a code equal to the Library Bill of Rights is a sign of the laggardly development of freedom for children within the context of the school library. True, the problems of intellectual freedom in children's services are intertwined with questions of responsibility for protecting the young in their tender periods of growth; nevertheless, it seems possible to make greater efforts than many librarians are willing to put forth to expand intellectual horizons at an earlier age.

In public libraries there is still a tendency for juvenile book selection to be less inventive than adult, and the hoary practice of marking children with special library cards that restrict their access to vast collections and services of the library not only diminishes the dignity of children but also inhibits their growth into the adult community.

In these areas of librarianship lies the greatest opportunity for the expansion of intellectual freedom in the next decade.

References

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3. Fiske, Marjorie. *Book Selection and Censorship: A Study of School and Public Libraries in California.* Berkeley, Calif., University of California Press, 1959.